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## ABSTRACT

The structure of a computer assisted instruction (CAI) system designed to teach various straight-talk production skills, which are primarily defined in terms of syntactic features, is described. Project Straight Talk (PST) uses the terms "straight" talk and "everyday" talk to refer, respectively, to standard and non-standard dialects. PST teaches straight talk as a "second" dialect which is to be related to, compared with, and added on to everyday talk. This paper focuses on the content of the teaching material included in PST, and on PST as a CAI system that is independent of teaching material. PST is written in Coursewriter III and is composed of three functionally different, but interrelated components: (1) a monitor which executes the actual course material; (2) a set of macros that enable authors to write Preview, Tutorial, and Practice phases using whatever topic content is needed; and (3) the content material itself, of which there are 30 topics currently written. The issue of how to teach language production skills is complex, however, and no claims are made beyond the fact that this seems to be a plausible approach to teaching certain aspects of straight talk syntax to children for whom everyday talk is standard dialect. (VT)

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PROJECT STRAIGHT-TALK

by

Don Nix

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## Project STRAIGHT- TALK

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### I. Introduction

It is an established statistic that black children, who speak a dialect that is different than the prevailing white middle class dialect embodied in the educational establishment, often have difficulties when required to implement social interactions in the dialect with which they are not familiar (see, eg., Northcutt, 1975). A typical educational approach that is taken is to *replace* the so-called nonstandard dialect with the prevailing white middle class dialect. Such an educational approach at least appears to assume that there is something intrinsically wrong with the child's non-standard dialect. There is no question that a pervasive prejudice exists within the confines of the public school system, as well as society at large, against the use of non-standard dialects. But, there are no clear didactic reasons for replacing such dialects with the standard dialect. Presumably it is possible to teach a child the standard dialect as an added-on way of speaking (or writing or reading), and to also teach the child to switch to such a dialect when it is perceived to be socially expedient for him or her to do so. (The subject of the second dialect approach has been discussed, pro and con, extensively, with as yet little conclusive data. See, for example, Baratz & Shuy, 1969; Hall & Turner, 1974; Harber & Bryen, 1976. Most of the discussion so far has focused on the relationship between a non-standard dialect and the comprehension of standard English.)

The CAI system to be described here uses the terms "straight talk" and "everyday talk" to refer, respectively, to standard and non-standard dialects. The name of the system itself is "Project Straight Talk", or, "PST". PST is based on the premise that everyday-talk, although no better or worse than straight-talk, is decidedly less useful than straight-talk in those social situations in which straight-talk is the dominant dialect. These social situations are pervasive, due to the fact that straight-talk represents the norm of linguistic access to many job seeking, information gathering, and educational attainment activities. Straight-talk has a wider ranging survival value than everyday-talk, given the socio-economic structure of current U.S. society. The purpose of PST, then, is to teach various straight-talk production skills, primarily defined in terms of syntactic features.

Since, however, everyday-talk is not to be designated as to be replaced, the method of teaching straight-talk in PST is to teach it as a "second" dialect which is to be related to, compared with, and added on to everyday-talk. This is in some ways analogous to teaching French to an English speaking student by teaching French as a translation of English. A constant focus would be maintained on going from French to English, and from English to French. Points of difference between languages would be directly emphasized, especially where such points involved high frequency aspects of one of the languages, and/or where such points were particularly confusing. The student's English would not be designated as bad, or inconsistent, or lazy. No attempt would be made to get rid of it.

It should be noted that PST does not actually teach talking. The use of "talk" in this paper refers to the linguistic product, rather than to the mode of producing it. However, PST, like other silent teaching materials (such as books), presumably has an effect on the way students talk.

It should also be noted that two types of focus run through this paper. The first focus is on the content of the teaching material included in PST. The second focus is on PST as a CAI system that is independent of the teaching material.

## II. PST: Orientation and Content

PST is designed to teach two types of skills. First, it is designed to teach a student to use the concepts of "working" and "not working" to label different types of talk. This system of labelling is in direct opposition to the labelling supported in normal educational efforts. Normally, different language occurrences are designated either as right, or wrong, depending on whether the occurrence fits the conventional patterns that typify the majority culture. Actually such pejorative terms as "bad", "lazy", "meaningless", as well as others, are often used to label non-standard patterns. Thus, a statement such as, "Franny always go to that haunted house -- she just ain't too smart!", would typically be considered poor, or even incomprehensible, English, or perhaps not even English at all. However, the statement about Franny is quite clear. From the perspective of PST there is nothing bad or poor about the statement.

Clearly, however, such a statement may cause a listener to be critical of the speaker, depending on the social situation in which the statement was made. For example, if the statement were made to a peer who used similar patterns it would "work". If it were made to a white middle class English teacher, it would most likely "not work". PST is intended to teach the student to explicitly label instances of language as working or not working, based on their expediency for a given social situation (e.g., at home, at school, writing a letter to a friend, writing a letter to apply for a job, and so on). The use of the concepts "right" and "wrong" is so ingrained, and, from the point of view of PST, itself wrong, that PST attempts to systematically replace such use with the use of the concepts of working and not working. There is an extended tutorial that interactively defines the terms straight-talk and everyday-talk on the basis of situational utility, and teaches the student to label language instances as "working" or "not working", rather than as "right" or "wrong". A posttest determines the success of this tutorial. If necessary, further practice is given before continuing with the actual syntax teaching to be described below. It should be noted that an understanding of straight-

talk syntax is not necessary for this tutorial. The notions of working and not working, versus right and wrong, are taught independently of specific straight and everyday talk language conventions.

The second type of skill PST teaches is the ability to recognize and produce various straight-talk grammatical conventions, and to relate them to everyday-talk conventions, where relevant. Straight-talk is presented as an additional way of talking, in particular in certain types of social settings. Training in going from straight-talk to everyday-talk, and from everyday-talk to straight-talk, is the bulk of the course. There are 30 topics which teach various specific straight-talk grammatical conventions (use of negatives, noun/verb agreement, and so on) and relate them to the corresponding everyday-talk conventions, in those cases where they differ.

### **III. PST: Structure**

PST is written in the Coursewriter-III author language. It is composed of three functionally different, but interrelated, components. (1) PST contains a monitor which executes the actual course material. The monitor makes all decisions about what to do next, in terms of the student's response, the student's relevant history of responses, the student's response latency, and the decision criteria included as defaults in the monitor or supplied by the student or the teacher or the author. The monitor also provides a report of the student's activity with PST. The report is displayed at the end of each session. In addition a complete trace of the student's interaction is maintained, and it can also be displayed if desired.

There is a set of commands available to a student as he or she uses PST. These can be entered whenever the system is waiting for a response, and are interpreted as commands rather than as answers to questions. For example, a student can request a brief status report that indicates how he or she is doing on the current topic, with reference to the criteria PST is

currently using. The student can ask how much time is left in the current session. Other command options enable the student to skip various parts of the course material, to ask for rules that describe the material currently being taught, to ask for a different topic, and to terminate the session. The PST monitor detects and executes these commands, in some cases subject to various conditions prevailing at the time the commands are entered.

In addition to making presentation decisions, providing status reporting, and providing student command options, the PST monitor also contains routines to allow teachers and others to modify the parameters under which PST operates. Thus, for example, changes can be made to the duration of the session time limit, the response latency criteria, the various criteria used to determine where to go next, the topic list, the makeup list, the type of feedback given to the student, the remediation criteria, as well as to various other values. These changes can be made at any time PST is running, by typing a special command. PST then interactively prompts the user for the various types of changes that can be made, and also provides format and other explanatory information if the user needs it in order to make the changes he or she wants. The changes go into effect as soon as they are entered.

The PST monitor views the subject material as segmented into topics. For each topic there can be a Preview, Tutorial, and Practice phase. The general procedure is to present the Preview in order to determine whether or not to continue with the current topic. If the student has no trouble producing the target answers (according to the default criteria in the monitor, or other criteria specified by the topic author, or the student's teacher, or the student), then PST sequences on to the next topic on the list for the student. If the student has trouble with target answers, PST will suggest skipping the rest of the Preview, or will automatically terminate the Preview and go into the Tutorial phase for the topic. The student may also initiate the skipping of the Preview if he or she wishes to. The criteria for the Preview are structured to enable a student who is having no trouble to get through quickly, and to enable a student who is having trouble to get to the Tutorial quickly. The Tutorial

phase for each topic is designed to actually teach the topic. It is followed by the Practice phase which is designed to determine, using the same general presentation format as the Preview, whether the student has mastered the topic. Criteria structuring is similar to the Preview, and skipping is also provided. It should be noted that the PST monitor is independent of the content of the topic material.

(2) The second component of PST is a set of macros that enable authors to write Preview, Tutorial, and Practice phases, using whatever topic content needed. It is not necessary for the author to have any knowledge of computer programming or the Coursewriter language. It is only necessary, using the PST macros, to specify the content (explanations, questions, directions, examples, feedback, etc.) to be presented to the student. The macros are then generated into coding sequences that interface to the monitor. The monitor then runs this material, supplying the various criteria, sequencing, status, and other features outlined above.

Using the macro facility, then, an author (for example, a teacher) can write material to add to the PST material (see (3) below). In addition, an author can write his or her own course that the monitor would execute independently of PST's material. By using the macro facility, along with the facility to change various PST operating parameters, PST can be altered considerably at any time. This can accomplish, for example, the changing of parameters and/or the adding, deleting, or replacing of subject material. This can be done for individual students, groups of students, or all students.

(3) The third component of PST is the content material itself. As mentioned above, there are 30 topics currently written. These 30 topics use, in their interaction with the student, a vocabulary that is intended to support the student when he or she is having problems. The terms "right" and "wrong" are not used to label either language instances or answers the student gives. Answers that match the goal of a given topic are referred to as answers that "work" for that topic, and under those circumstances. The answers that work are the "target" answers the topic is designed to teach.

The specific topics currently included cover such areas as: singular and plural words, verb testers, finding verbs, finding noun phrases, finding verb phrases, modals, verb forms, auxiliaries, finding subjects of noun phrases, finding negative words, using negative words, forms of "be", contractions, and pronouns. Some of these topics have straight-talk target answers, while others require the student to respond in everyday-talk.

#### IV. Some results of using PST

PST exists in relatively stable condition. Several types of evaluation have been conducted. (1) The first evaluation was the obvious one of determining that the course would operate as intended. This evaluation took a considerable amount of time due to the complexity and size of the course, and was completed successfully. (2) A second evaluation was to determine if the course would teach what it was intended to teach, given that an entering student could not already master the particular content. Fifteen topics were used (all that existed in a completed state at the time of the evaluation), with 30 3rd grade students. Each topic had a Preview, Tutorial, and Practice. If a student who did not meet the Preview criteria could meet the (same level) Practice criteria after taking the Tutorial session, then it was assumed he or she learned what PST was intended to teach. For 11 of the 15 topics, all students who did not meet Preview criteria, and who progressed through the Tutorial, were able to meet Practice criteria. The other four topics were revised but not further tested. (3) For a set of 8 topics which had a concentrated focus on syntactic conventions that differed between everyday-talk and straight-talk, two groups of 8 4th grade students were given different types of instruction. The children were randomly assigned to the two groups. The "second dialect" group took the normal PST instruction. The "single dialect" group took a modified version of PST that did not stress the straight/everyday-talk distinction. For the Practice phase, the single-dialect group made more responses that did not work (average=81.3), than did the second-dialect group (average=52.5). This difference is significant at  $p < .01$  ( $F(1,14)=11.46$ ). This is a

preliminary evaluation of a "second" dialect approach. (4) All students successfully completed the tutorial sessions that presented the new labels for linguistic instances (that is, "works", "does not work"). This was measured by a linguistic "locus of control" test that was developed, based on the standard locus of control measure, and was given to each student after he or she completed the tutorial. The majority of students scored as "internals". No comparison was made between these scores and actual performance on PST, nor was any pre-measure taken. The locus of control measure was not independent in content from the actual content of the tutorial. This was a particularly interesting result, and, if validated, it could provide, by itself, a justification for PST.

## V. Conclusions

PST is a functioning CAI system. It provides the facility to investigate various questions concerning the teaching of straight-talk to children for whom everyday-talk is the predominant dialect. It is a working hypothesis that, as far as it has been evaluated, appears to be a plausible approach to teaching certain aspects of straight-talk syntax to children for whom everyday talk is the standard dialect. The issue of how to teach language production skills is complex, however, and no claims are made on the basis of the above results.

In addition to the complexity of the purely didactic issue (that is, what is the most effective teaching method), it is not easy to decide among the various options for what should be taught. The rationale behind the decision, in PST, to actually teach straight-talk is as follows. It is a fact that straight-talk is preferred in numerous social situations, and that everyday-talk is not. Thus, straight-talk is worth learning, as long as it is depicted as a socially expedient dialect that a user has access to at his or her discretion.

However, it can also be argued that straight-talk is *not* worth learning, since everyday-talk is a legitimate, clear, consistent dialect. The fact that the majority culture uses straight-talk

does not justify imposing that dialect as a condition for access. Instead, the majority culture should be educated to cease judging everyday-talk as something that is wrong and something that should be changed. As stated above, the choice in PST was that straight-talk is worth learning. It seems to be easier to teach children an add-on dialect than it is to teach adults and children not to be prejudiced.

Although PST teaches straight-talk, there is no implication that this should be a general educational plan. It is simply not possible to make a dogmatic statement about what kind of talk should be taught. The factors that go into making a decision involve political, economic, and cultural considerations that are far more complex than educational considerations. All that can be said is that the content material in PST is intended to represent a hypothesis about only one of the many options.

In addition to the content material, PST is a working system that enables computer-naive authors to generate course material that can subsequently be executed with all the facility outlined above. It is currently being used to develop reading comprehension materials based on research efforts (Nix, in press; Nix & Schwarz, in press) unrelated to syntax production. It could be used to implement other subject matter as well (such as, for example, teaching everyday-talk).

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